



At left: A sheet of George Bridgman's studies, measuring 5 x 10 feet, dates from the late 1920s. Collection of Deane G. Keller. Below: Deane Keller (1901-1992) teaches one-on-one, "Bridgman style," in his life class at Yale University, c. 1962.

Master Draftsman at the League: George Brant Bridgman

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Bridgman—to those of us who have continued to study and teach life drawing and anatomy first as students and now as instructors—the name is a legend as is his classic manual on life drawing, *Constructive Anatomy*. For eighty-one years the ideas so powerfully supported by his drawings in *Constructive Anatomy* have been the indispensable reference for serious students of life drawing. It is the summa in its field. If it has not always been referred to or enough studied that has been because the figure in fine art has suffered monumental decline in the current era. After decades of drawing has been belittled and discredited by art school mission statements. The recent discovery of a cache of drawings by both Bridgman and his students at the Art Students League may provide the impetus to restore substance to fine art and integrity to life drawing.

George Brant Bridgman (1864-1943) had studied at the École des Beaux Arts under Jean-Léon Gérôme, whom Thomas Eakins, Julian Alden Weir, and other American students could also claim as their master. To this distinguished traditional training Bridgman brought an imaginative new foundation in his teaching at the Art Students League, from 1898 to 1943, which was sculptural in its expression and structural in its explanation of the architectonic framework of figure construction. To this straight-forward notion he gave immense authority through his drawings which richly display his enthusiasm, experience, and command of his subject.

Bridgman lectured on the human anatomy in addition to drawing for each student. He is shown standing before a 5 x 10 foot roll of drawing paper in a 1942 *Time* magazine essay entitled, "Bone and Muscle Man." The article begins, "As Manhattan's Art Students League dusted out its classrooms for the opening of the fall semester last week a spry, round-faced oldster with a

head as bald as a pumpkin prepared for another whack at the job he had been doing year in and year out for the past 43 years: teaching US artists how to draw the human figure." In the accompanying photograph, Bridgman grips the familiar drawing staff which held the charcoal at its tip, and on the paper in the background one recognizes the characteristic force of his draftsman-ship. About 50 or 60 of these large drawing demonstrations survive, and they are impressive. With vigorous contours and emphatic lines in search of the figure's "landmarks," these large demonstration drawings record Bridgman's sure hand in sorting through the masses and mechanics of joint systems and the harness of muscle and tendon "straps" which puts the figure into action. Four hundred drawings illustrate the structure and mechanics of the body in *The Human Machine* (1939) by Bridgman. Based on his students' drawings in the Art Students League's collection, most of which Bridgman had critiqued, the number of drawings made by his students through the years must number in the hundreds of thousands. According to some accounts he did this for 70,000 students for almost half a century.

The image of the short, stocky, formally attired figure of "old man Bridgman" is familiar to us and brought to life through stories told by his former students—one of whom was my father, Deane Keller (1901-1992). One of my father's stories illustrates the "no-nonsense" approach which defined Bridgman's classes. In notes written for me forty years ago on drawing, painting, and composition, my father discussed the median line of the torso, a vital construction line which links the ribcage to the pelvis and is indispensable in introducing movement in the torso. While illustrating the importance of the median line for me, my father recalled an incident which took place at the League when he was studying with Bridgman: "Through thirty years of life class teaching," he wrote, "D.K. has not found too many students who will follow this instruction and use it. For the most part a student will put the median

line in (wrongly) when he sees me coming. It must be the other way around, as it is one of the most useful construction lines. D.K. saw George Bridgman take a blunt end of a thick piece of charcoal and draw the mid line right down across a beautifully finished and modeled drawing years ago at the Art Students League in NYC, about 1922. He never uttered a word, handed the charcoal to Mike Mueller, the student and my friend, looked at him over his pin-nez and went to the next." This was Bridgman's (and Keller's) direct approach to drawing instruction—to identify with a single stroke a thing poorly conceived and so leave the student with the unequivocal priority of restating the whole drawing if necessary.

Recently some of us have reviewed a newly discovered collection of drawings at the League and have admired and appreciated once again the impressive effort put forth in the drawing Bridgman did for each student. They reveal unequalled knowledge of anatomical construction and clarity of visual demonstration and are drawn with characteristic energy. Bridgman's drawings for students responded to issues both perceptual (action, proportions) and cognitive (what was revealed by the pose, and why). The drawings record the harness of muscle "bundles" as their tendons cross joint systems, extending and flexing, abducting and adducting, supinating and pronating, and massing and "wedging"—a signature Bridgman metaphor for the sculptural forces driving his drawings.

In no small measure the instruction I received from my father in the early 1960s in life drawing and anatomy clearly followed the "all business" pattern and substance of Bridgman's classes. We worked long and hard at the hard work of learning to draw, spending 18 hours on some of the drawings with criticism on Tuesday and Thursdays. My father contributed his time. The fee for three months of drawing from the model and with instruction was \$75. There was little support for this traditional



work to be found anywhere in the nation at that time and all reference to the traditional past (plaster casts, drawing from the "antique") had been banished by most institutions. I know that he was glad to support our own modest but honest efforts and to do this for his own son.

My father, like Bridgman, was a draftsman. He had the experience and ability to explain and demonstrate what he had in mind for his students at the Yale Art School (1930-1972) and for undergraduates in Yale College with respect to both theory and practice in drawing from life, and he offered this instruction throughout his own long career as a portrait painter and draftsman. His criticisms were usually devastatingly complete, but he never left a student wondering what to do. He would offer a drawing in the margin or a restructuring of the entire drawing for his students, and for whatever the drawing problem there would always be a suggestion and demonstration as to how to fix it. We learned what was meant by integrity in drawing in the traditional manner, and we would be reminded (when we most needed it) that there was nobility in this work (Rubens, Leonardo, Michelangelo). Some sense of the art of drawing was revealed to us through the study of the craft of drawing. Often discouraged when our drawings seemed to record every possible error, we would hear him say, "Never mind, just do another one."

I am certain that the effort, the tone and conduct of the class, the sense of purpose which we all felt was due in large measure to the fact that our instructor, my father, bore the imprimatur of one who had studied with Bridgman and had learned a great deal from him, and that the work in our studio was much the same and shared the same values as did the League studio



Deane G. Keller, the author, with his charcoal study, 72 X 54 in. Collection of Charlotte Danly Jackson.

classes when Bridgman and his students were drawing there.

Summary

Bridgman drawings characteristically bear the immediate impression of tremendous energy and commitment. All of the familiar choices are there to anyone familiar at all with his work and his monumental *Constructive Anatomy* (1920). The combination of rhythmic line and organic shapes, the graphic line of the draftsman searching, interpreting the anatomical structure—all present a powerful impression and to students watching this all unfold it must have seemed miraculous.

It is Bridgman's unique contribution to the art of anatomical construction that his drawings put the joints and muscles into action. The common practice in teaching the human anatomy is to offer frozen diagrams in front, back, side elevation and require students to memorize these lifeless constructs. These are the views which one finds in texts: anterior, posterior, and lateral "views" of the figure. Bridgman's drawings put the systems into dynamic action in demonstration of the function and design of the figure, and his choice of poses for his drawings carries a strong sense of the classical tradition. The drawings have a sculptural presence, the feeling of weight through modeling and contour rich in the suggestion of form. Bridgman's contribution as an instructor, demonstrator in anatomy and figure drawing, and as a draftsman deserves the recognition which he may again receive.

Most impressive, of course, is the caliber of the draftsman's hand. Bridgman had the combined gifts of a strong sense of the classic point of view and a style of presentation which was informed, sure, and original. He was demanding of himself and capable of elaboration on the subject of the human figure drawn from memory. These are great and unique gifts, and one need only contemplate the prospect of rendering an anatomically conceived drawing without the use of the model in order to gauge the knowledge, experience, and gifts of this memorable draftsman and teacher.

Critiquing a drawing the Bridgman way

Bridgman has reworked this student's entire drawing. Traces of the student's work remain but this drawing was uniformly erased with the chamois. Problem areas corrected by Bridgman are the foreshortening of the head, the anatomical left shoulder, and the anatomical left leg. To be fair in appraisal of the student's original drawing, I suspect that the action and sizes were not so far off the mark which allowed Bridgman to give his attention to further definition and articulation throughout the drawing. There is no question in recognizing Bridgman's "hand" at work: the energetic line, the sure succession of overcuts (the relation of deep, middle, and superficial muscle groups), and the draftsman's landmarks noted everywhere. This "correction" amounts to an abbreviated *écorché* or flaying of the structure—a skill few instructors of life drawing have ever had. Without detailing every anatomical reference in the drawing I should at least record what he has found and drawn since his criticisms addressed both the specific conditions of the pose and the anatomical references. In other words Bridgman has sorted out and solved "drawing" problems through the application and identification of the following anatomical agenda: supra-sternal notch, sternum, median line, external oblique, abdominal wall, tensor fasciae latae, great trochanter, sartorius, quadriceps, patella and patellar ligament, gastrocnemius, soleus, tibia and fibula, etc. The point to make here is that the construction of the figure offers Bridgman the means, the self-evident and obvious strategy to draw it. Thus the demonstration offers both an answer to the problem of acknowledging the forms in accordance with the particular pose as well as to draw with a full sense of the priority of certain elements of anatomical construction offered by that pose. Bridgman did both at the same time—solving the relation of the masses in the pose and indicating the anatomical construction. This is not generally done by instructors of life drawing since few know the anatomy well enough. This demanding strategy from the point of view of instruction is difficult but became Bridgman's signature style; the drawing was a "Bridgman" because it was so generously informed anatomically. Certainly in the first instant in appraising a student drawing Bridgman would have "surveyed" the drawing and determined unhesitatingly the priority in his criticism: what the student has or has not seen in the overview and in its rhythms, what points to demonstrate, and then to commence his work on the drawing which fearlessly records the imprint of his immense authority.



George Bridgman, *Untitled*, undated. Graphite on paper, 10 1/4 X 5 1/2 in. Permanent Collection of the Art Students League of New York.

Comments on Bridgman drawings Torso, pelvis, leg

In four drawings Bridgman has drawn both the masses and mechanisms of the torso and upper leg. "The pelvis can be compared to a wheel," Bridgman writes in *The Human Machine*, "with only two spokes: the hub is the hip joint and the spokes are the legs which swing back and forth as in walking or running."

Typically, Bridgman identifies the priorities of masses of the torso (thorax and pelvis) and the mechanism of pelvis and leg as well as a drawing of the entire figure which takes a pose of considerable rotation and foreshortening. He removes the "envelope" of the muscle masses to get at the structure. Clearly his purpose is to offer through drawings and diagrams a conception of its functional design which a student could use. As always there is the suggestion of contour modeling in Bridgman's drawings in order to indicate form, masses, and planes of the figure.

This sheet of drawings seems to have been prepared for publication since it offers four related drawings at about the same scale: (1) The entire figure in a situation of dynamic movement (2) An abbreviated *écorché* of the hip and leg, and (3) Two schematic drawings to illustrate the dynamics of construction and relation of torso, pelvis, and leg.

This sheet of drawings illustrates Bridgman's own advice: "Before you make a line you must have a clear conception of what you want to draw. In your mind it is necessary to have an idea of what the figure to be drawn is doing. This conception is the real beginning of your drawing."

At left: A drawing by Bridgman student Elizabeth C. Crittenden. *Untitled*, c. 1916-1918. Vine charcoal on paper, 18 X 12 in. Permanent collection of the Art Students League of New York.

